

## THE RETHINKING EVANGELISM REPORT APRIL 2011

On March 24<sup>th</sup> 2011, one hundred and thirty Christian Leaders from twelve denominations across Suffolk assembled in Bury St Edmunds for a Re-Thinking Evangelism Forum.

The following report is made up of Section A, the results of the Rethinking Evangelism Questionnaire (which 84 of the delegates completed), and Section B which is a selection of comments arising from the day plus a summary.

### Section A: Findings from the Questionnaire

#### 1 Imagine Evangelism is a cake. What are its most important ingredients today?

In order of importance the results were as follows:-

- 1<sup>st</sup> Praying
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Getting alongside people in their everyday lives and developing relationships
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Sharing the Christian Faith in words on a personal level
- 4<sup>th</sup> Christians living with integrity and honesty in life
- 5<sup>th</sup> Acts of kindness
- 6<sup>th</sup> Listening and trying to understand why people think the way they do
- 7<sup>th</sup> Being culturally relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the way the Gospel is communicated
- 8<sup>th</sup> Engaging with people during times of transition or passage (e.g. birth, marriage, death etc)
- 9<sup>th</sup> Preaching the Gospel in public places (e.g. church or other venues)
- 10<sup>th</sup> Inviting people to special 'outreach' services at church
- 11<sup>th</sup> Intellectually defending the Christian Faith in debate/discussion
- 12<sup>th</sup> Giving out Christian literature to "strangers"

#### Question

- Are there any common themes which characterise the forms of evangelism in the top and bottom halves of this table?

2. Now please try and be a little more specific. Are there any forms or ways of doing evangelism that you think used to be effective but are not now? If yes, what are they? Why might this be the case?

In order of perceived *ineffectiveness* the top 10 forms of evangelism today are listed below.

- a) Street Preaching (especially the aggressive type)
- b) Crusades and Tent Meetings inc open air events
- c) Literature/Tract Distribution to strangers
- d) Door to door cold calling
- e) Gospel services in church
- f) Church Missions/campaigns
- g) Traditional Sunday School
- h) Debates
- i) Franchising of methods which worked in other cultures but not ours
- j) Anything shabbily presented

Question:

- Having identified these, is there a danger of dismissing them altogether? Are there not certain people specifically gifted in some of these areas? Can we glean some things from these ten categories which can actually be effective?

As to the second part of question 2, 'Why might this be the case?' three themes kept recurring:-

- There is an increasingly distant 'memory' for many people of Christian things. Some people have no memory or knowledge of the Christian Faith at all. Today people do not have a Christian frame of reference in order to interpret messages about Christianity which come at them 'cold' or with no detailed explanation. There is a vacuum of knowledge which non-relational forms of evangelism will not fill.
- People have negative experiences of people who sell things. People who sell things on streets, on the phone and at the door are often pushy, threatening or on commission. Their real character is unknown. People, who sell Christianity, unless they are well known and respected, are viewed in a similar way. People are increasingly suspicious of people they don't know. This today includes Christians, even Christian Leaders! What is called for is authentic Christianity.
- Some forms of communication are increasingly unacceptable in some cultures. Street preaching and open-air evangelism runs the risk of this although

something very professional may be acceptable. A lack of professionalism in any medium of communication is likely to devalue the message.

3. On the other hand, are there any forms of evangelism that you think are particularly effective today? Why might this be the case?

The top five categories for *effectiveness* are listed below:-

- a) Relationship/Friendship
- b) Personal Contact /Natural conversation (Telling ones own stories/experiences)
- c) Social/Small Groups/Courses (Food/Drink – Home/Café/Sport etc)
- d) Giving time, care, kindness (Pastoral concern)
- e) Prayer for people (at the right time – inc healing)

As to the second part of question 2, 'Why might this be the case?' the following additional points were made:-

- Alpha has been one of the most effective forms of evangelism in the last decade. Alpha places importance on a-c above.
- People need to belong before they believe.
- Incarnational evangelism – being practically involved in other peoples' lives so they can see the real you and your real faith – is important.
- People are willing to receive prayer at an appropriate moment (particularly in the context of a-d).
- We should be friends with people because we love them not because we have a hidden agenda to covert them.

4. Compared to 30-40 years ago, do you think that the UK is more or less receptive to Christianity? Please give a reason for your answer.

61% = less

Major reasons given included:-

Secularism  
Marginalisation of Christianity  
Political Correctness  
Apathy towards God  
Materialism/Consumerism  
Pluralism  
Busyness

Individualistic/self centred attitude  
Church as a failed institution  
Culturally irrelevant  
Scientific worldview

19% = more

Major Reasons given included:-

A greater spiritual awareness and curiosity  
People searching for answers but not looking to the church  
People are responding to genuine, authentic Christians  
Many people are starting with a blank piece of paper

15% =both

The dominant theme in this category was that whereas people have dismissed institutionalised religion they have not dismissed authentic faith. They are less receptive to organised Christianity but open to Christian ideas and genuine Christian expression. People may have rejected established traditional forms of Christianity but are open to Jesus and his teaching.

5% = same

Our perception of things today may feel worse than 30-40 years ago but are they?

##### 5. In your opinion, what might be the keys to effective evangelism from 2011-2020?

Again, to keep things simple, only the top ten are listed, in order of perceived importance.

- a) Build relationships....people matter
- b) Be incarnational in our communities....walk in peoples shoes...get involved long term
- c) Pray for people
- d) Win the right to be heard...earn trust...be authentic
- e) Listen to people so that we can understand them and they can understand us
- f) Be clear in our communication of what we believe and why
- g) Get the whole church involved in local mission
- h) Rely on the Holy Spirit and be filled with the Spirit
- i) Be relevant in how we communicate (language & the media we use)
- j) Work in partnership with other Christians

## Section B: A Selection of Comments Arising from the Day.

### **'One approach will not reach all'**

Krish Kandiah's address pointed out that the phrase 'born again' (John 3) came in the context of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. That phrase has become common currency for 'conversion' in many evangelical circles, yet the same phrase never occurs again in Jesus' conversation. As we read on to John 4 and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus' way in has to do with water, thirst and eternal life.

This raises the issue of what language we use to express the gospel. It challenges any assumption that a 'one size fits all' will do as we tell the story of Jesus. If we use the classic 'bridge to life', 'Four Spiritual Laws' or fuller explorations of Christian faith (e.g. Alpha or Christianity Explored) we must be aware that one approach will not reach all.

Current U.K. culture is very diverse (especially youth culture) as is personal experience. When we are as keen to *listen* as to speak we can pick up clues that will give us ways in. As a dad of four adopted children, the idea of 'Adoption' as a motif expressing salvation has special relevance.

Ask yourself what might be a meaningful motif for salvation for someone in debt; a drug addict; an environmental campaigner, an elderly and lonely neighbour, a parent of a busy family.....

Keys:

- We must listen to the culture we are part of and reaching out to.
- We need to listen to our neighbours, often taking our queue from their life, language and experience
- We should seek an awareness of what God is doing and co-operate with his prompting.

But always, the message we bring will be centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the transforming event in history.

Revd Robert Green (Garland Street Baptist, Bury St. Edmunds)

### **'The cultural landscape is changing'**

The cultural landscape is changing. This should be no surprise – it always does. When West Road Church opened on the corner of West Rd and Queen's Road fifty years ago and advertised a Sunday School – 200 children turned up the first week. That is unlikely to happen today. A couple of generations ago you could put up a tent on a village green and advertise a 'mission' and with a bit work be fairly sure that the place would be full.

This also is unlikely to happen today. But instead of wringing our hands about what doesn't work – we should be putting our shoulders into what is working today. The Alpha Course (other brands are available) is prospering. I have been involved in about ten. In every one people have become Christians or made huge steps in their faith. Alpha, I think, is successful for a variety of reasons. It isn't preachy. It allows dissent. It invites questions. It is informal. It is social – it is always fascinating to watch a group begin to find its identity and watch relationships develop. Many people are lonely and lack the kind of relationships in which deep questions can be addressed. In general people have a low opinion of 'organized' religion – but Alpha and its ilk, seems 'of the people', egalitarian rather than hierarchical.

All of this emphasizes the role that ordinary people have in sharing the message of Christ. This was always God's intention. (Ephesians 4) The scattered persecuted Christians 'gossiped' the gospel. (Acts 8v4) And their testimony was very effective. It still is today. Where Christians live with integrity and enthusiasm – it is attractive. We should all be 'ready to give an answer' ( 1 Peter 3v15) but for me, the most challenging part of those verses is the presupposition that we should be living with such a radiant and evident sense of hope that those around us cannot fail to notice and begin asking questions.

*<sup>15</sup> But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, <sup>16</sup> keeping a clear conscience 1 Peter 3v15-16*

Pastor Simon Ladd, West Road Church, Bury St. Edmunds

### **'God is nothing if not a communicator'**

There is a recent trend among evangelicals to take it as read that acts of kindness and relationship building equate to evangelism. Whether this comes from fear of the culture (as Christians tend to receive bad headlines when they open their mouths) or a particular theological stance (Anglicans love talking about incarnational ministry!), I think the trend is misplaced. God is nothing if not a communicator – he sent us his living word, Jesus Christ and tells about himself in his Spirit-inspired word, the Bible.

So we must speak of God to others; this is an essential ingredient of evangelism which reflects God's own activity. To break away from this fearing negative reactions or bad publicity, is to reject one of the most potent instruments God has given us for evangelism – our speech!

Revd David Ruddick, St John's Elmswell

### **'Gathered....scattered...'**

The church gathered must be a light in its community. The church scattered needs to be salt and yeast within the community bringing transformation to individual lives, our communities at every level and to the wider world.

Captain Kathleen Versfeld, Salvation Army, Felixstowe

### **'Way of Life'**

Evangelism should be a way of life

Peter Matthews, Senior Leader, Capel St Mary Community Church

### **And Finally,**

The Rethinking Evangelism day was a forum. By its very nature a forum engages delegates in discussion in order to learn from one another as well as learn from the speakers. As a result specific conclusions may be less forthcoming. Having said this certain trends have shone through which might result in the following conclusions.

1. Churches need to consider how they can mobilise their people to live and breathe authentic Christianity 24-7.
2. Christians need to be encouraged to develop genuine relationships with people outside the church.
3. Short evangelistic courses are worth considering. The principles on which Alpha runs have proved very successful.
4. As one size doesn't fit all, churches need to build in fluidity to their evangelistic methods keeping programmes flexible and adaptable.
5. Pastoral work should be seen as evangelistic when dealing with the needs of non-Christians.
6. Evangelism involves risk. New forms of evangelism (e.g. café, Costa coffee) and personal conversation in whatever context involves 'stepping out'.
7. The gospel remains the same but the context we are in may determine the way it is expressed.
8. The gospel is about an individual's salvation but it also has corporate, cosmic significance.
9. The church as a local community is ideally placed in a time when people are looking for genuine expressions of community.
10. Whatever we do we must never neglect prayer or the role of the Spirit.

Andrew Buttress (Director of Spectrum)

If you wish to respond then blog: <http://spectrumchristianstudies.com/blog/>